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Oklahoma contractor sued several times over jail deaths

by **BRIANNA BAILEY**

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A nurse who worked for a private company at the Garfield County jail allegedly did nothing to intervene while a hallucinating man was kept in a restraint chair for more than 48 hours. Anthony Huff, 58, ultimately died restrained in the chair.

The contractor, Oklahoma City-based Turn Key Health Clinics LLC, is the largest medical care provider to county jails in the state.

Turn Key's owners include state Rep. Jon Echols, R-Oklahoma City, and former University of Oklahoma football player Trent Smith, who was tight end on the 2000 National Championship team.

Court documents, jail incident reports and medical examiner's records reviewed by *The Oklahoman* revealed several deaths and severe injuries at county jails. The newspaper has a contract with Turn Key to provide medical care to inmates.

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An El Reno man died in 2016 after being found naked, unconscious and covered in his own waste in a cell at the Canadian County Detention Center. The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner found the man had experienced a seizure in the days before his death.

A man in the Creek County jail died in September from a blood clot in his lungs after he repeatedly complained over several days of breathing problems and lost consciousness multiple times.

Another former inmate claims he is permanently paralyzed from the mid-chest down after medical staff at the Muskogee County jail told him he was faking his condition.

All three men were held at county jails where Turn Key is contracted to provide medical care and the circumstances resulted in lawsuits.

In a statement, Turn Key co-owner Trent Smith said it's not uncommon for former inmates to sue jail medical care contractors.

"Turn Key, an Oklahoma-based company, provides quality health care to over 6,900 Oklahoma inmates. Due to health care privacy laws Turn Key cannot comment on the health care information of any individual inmate," Trent Smith said. "The correctional health care industry in general is highly litigious and, despite this, Turn Key has one of the best litigation records in the industry. We will continue to provide quality health care services to our patients and will fully defend against any claims or allegations involving said care."

Rep. Echols said he is no longer involved in the day-to-day operations of Turn Key and is now a member-owner of the company. As a state lawmaker, he disclosed his ownership in Turn Key to the Oklahoma Ethics Commission, he said.

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Garfield County

A federal lawsuit Huff's family filed in June claims Lela Goatley, a nurse practitioner for Turn Key, did not treat Huff for symptoms of alcohol withdrawal, monitor his blood pressure or give him food and water or bathroom breaks during his time in the restraint chair at the Garfield County jail in Enid in June 2016.

At one point during the more than two days Huff was allegedly left in the restraint chair without food or water, a medical aide asked Goatley to check on Huff.

Goatley allegedly responded, "What do you want me to do?", Huff's family claims in the lawsuit.

Goatley never examined Huff further, the family claims.

The state's multicounty grand jury indicted Goatley, Garfield County Sheriff Jerry Niles and Vanisa Gay, a former Turn Key LPN and three other defendants in July after investigating Huff's death. All six are charged with second-degree manslaughter.

Goatley argues in court documents that the lawsuit against her should be dismissed because it was not her decision to place Huff in the restraining chair and that he never asked her for medical treatment.

Muskogee County

Michael Edwin Smith, 50, could walk when police arrested him at a Walmart in Muskogee in March 2016 on suspicion of obtaining merchandise under false pretense. He claims in a federal lawsuit filed in July that he left the jail two weeks later on a stretcher permanently paralyzed from the mid-chest down. Medical staff repeatedly ignored his pleas for help.

Michael Smith is suing the Muskogee County Jail and Turn Key.

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He claims he is permanently paralyzed after jail staff failed to provide him medical treatment after he repeatedly complained of severe pain in his back and chest, as well as numbness and tingling. Michael Smith had been previously diagnosed with pelvic cancer and was due to begin chemotherapy before his arrest.

He claims in the lawsuit his cancer had spread to his spine, causing a dangerous spinal compression, a condition that can cause permanent paralysis if left untreated.

“I kept telling them I was going paralyzed. The doctor laughed at me and told me I was the boy that cried wolf,” Michael Smith said. “They told me I was going to be on lockdown until I walked.”

For a week before he was able to bond out of jail, Michael Smith claims he was kept in an isolation cell on his back, unable to walk, bathe himself or use the bathroom on his own. He lay in his own urine and feces, because jail staff told him he was faking paralysis and refused to help him, he said.

Michael Smith's attorney, Lowell Howe, said a doctor who examined his client is prepared to testify that Smith's paralysis could have been treatable if jail medical staff would have taken him to a hospital.

“He needed treatment — he begged for treatment and they told him he was faking it and treated him like an animal,” Howe said.

Muskogee County Undersheriff Terry Freeman declined to comment on Michael Smith's case because of the ongoing lawsuit. The sheriff's office previously handled its medical care in-house before signing a contract with Turn Key in early 2016, he said.

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Canadian County

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Anthony Kade Davis, 46, of El Reno, died after being found naked and unconscious in his cell at the Canadian County Detention Center in June 2016.

At the time of his death, Davis had been in jail custody for five days after missing a court date for a previous misdemeanor DUI arrest.

“He was found lying naked on the floor of a cell, unresponsive, with observable external injuries and covered in human feces,” Davis' family claims in a federal lawsuit filed in July against Turn Key and former Sheriff Randall Edwards.

Davis' family claims that Turn Key Health Clinics staff at the jail failed to properly monitor, evaluate or treat Davis, although it was clear he was in pain and experiencing severe mental and physical health problems in the days before he died.

The state medical examiner found that Davis likely had a seizure in the days leading up to his death and that he had also suffered a cerebral hemorrhage, according to an autopsy report. Despite these findings, the medical examiner ruled Davis died due to liver disease caused by chronic alcoholism.

Canadian County Sheriff Chris West, who took office after Davis' death, said the sheriff's office began contracting with Turn Key to provide medical care under his predecessor a few years ago.

West said he could not comment on the specifics of the Davis case. However, West said he believes Turn Key is offering adequate care for jail inmates at a good price for taxpayers.

“We feel like we need to be good stewards of the people's money and so it's good practice to consult out for our medical professionals,” West said.

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Creek County
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Russell Ted Foutch, 49, of Cushing, died Sept. 30 after staff at the Creek County jail in Sapulpa observed him foaming at the mouth and coughing up blood, according to a federal lawsuit his family filed against Turn Key and Creek County officials in July.

Foutch was in Department of Corrections custody, serving a six-year prison sentence on drug and weapon-related charges, but was at the Creek County jail awaiting trial for second-degree murder. Foutch had been charged in connection with a head-on collision that killed a 76-year old man near Sapulpa in 2014.

Before Foutch's death, his family claims in its lawsuit that he lost consciousness multiple times in front of jail staff and that other inmates noticed that he was ill and asked that he receive treatment.

"Mr. Foutch laid in his cell and slowly died from complications related to pneumonia without ever receiving the medically appropriate treatment and care he so desperately and obviously needed to save his life," the family claims in its lawsuit.

According to a medical examiner's report, Foutch died of a blood clot in his lungs. Pneumonia is listed as a contributing factor in his death.

Tulsa County

Multiple sheriff's departments told *The Oklahoman* that Turn Key provides quality health care to jail inmates.

The Tulsa County Sheriff's Office said it has seen a significant decrease in the number of jail deaths since switching its contract health care service to Turn Key in November 2016.

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Since November, there have been only two inmate deaths at the Tulsa County jail, said Casey Roebuck, a sheriff's spokesman. One inmate died of natural causes at a hospital after a prolonged illness. Another died at a hospital after a suicide attempt.

In 2016, under a previous medical contractor, Armor Correctional Health Services, there were five deaths at the Tulsa County jail, Roebuck said.

Cleveland County

In 2014, Turn Key settled two lawsuits in connection with its care of Cleveland County jail inmates in Norman. The lawsuits were filed against Turn Key when the company was known as ESW Correctional Healthcare.

Curtis Gene Pruett, 36, died in a holding cell in October 2011 after jail staff allegedly ignored his repeated pleas for emergency medical attention, one lawsuit claimed.

Pruett was booked into the jail after police arrested him on suspicion of public intoxication, according to the lawsuit.

Pruett told jail staff that he had high blood pressure and that he was in severe pain, but they ignored his requests, according to a federal lawsuit filed against Cleveland County officials and ESW.

Attorney Peter Erdoes, who represented Pruett's family, said surveillance video showed Pruett doubled over and clutching his chest at the jail, but an ESW nurse told him he was faking his condition.

Pruett died of a heart attack, according to a medical examiner's report.

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Erdoes also represented the legal guardian of Lacey Danielle Marez, who lived in a vegetative state for several years after allegedly being denied medical care and going into cardiac arrest while detained at the Cleveland County jail in 2009.

Marez, then 21, was taken into custody for missing a court appearance and allegedly struck her head on a concrete floor during a struggle with jail staff, causing a traumatic brain injury, the lawsuit claimed.

Left in a holding cell for three days, Marez went into a coma and also suffered a heart attack, leading her to live in a "permanent vegetative state," the lawsuit claimed.

A critical care physician at Norman Regional Hospital wrote in a report filed with the court that jail medical staff neglected to treat Marez after a head injury.

"Lack of medical care during this time indicates either direct disregard or inadequate recognition of this woman's progressive and ultimately nearly fatal illness," the doctor wrote.

The lawsuit claimed Marez repeatedly asked for medical treatment over a period of several days.

"Marez began vomiting, urinating on herself, and laying lethargic on her cell bed," the lawsuit claimed.

Marez died last year, Erdoes said.

Settlements are confidential

Erdoes said he was "appalled" by the lack of medical care in both Marez's and Pruett's cases. ESW settled both lawsuits out of court. The financial terms of the settlements are confidential.

"Frankly, I think that these are people that have been convicted of anything yet, and they are entitled to a higher level of treatment," Erdoes said.

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certainly not up to the county through its private contractor to dole out health care. They are not the judge and jury of these people."

Cleveland County Sheriff Joe Lester declined a request for an interview.

Undersheriff Rhett Burnett said in an email that the company has been the medical contractor at the Cleveland County jail since about 2009. The county or sheriff's office has not paid out any legal claims since Turn Key was contracted, he said.

"We have been very pleased with their performance to date," Burnett said.



BRIANNA BAILEY

Brianna Bailey joined The Oklahoman in January 2013 as a business writer. During her time at The Oklahoman, she has walked across Oklahoma City twice, once north-to-south down Western Avenue, and once east-to-west, tracing the old U.S. Route 66.... [Read more](#)

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